

Number Three

In another camp we meet another woman who also describes her husband as crazy. He was tortured by the Russians who put electrodes to his head. Since he returned he has not worked. His central nervous system is damaged. He cannot even lift a cup of tea to his mouth without shaking violently. He cannot control his hands. He cannot go to the bazaar unaccompanied. When he leaves the house his four year old nephew, the oldest male in the household, goes with him.

She is a tailor and through the Assistance to Skilled Afghan Refugees project she received a sewing machine and is now able to support her five children and husband. Her neighbors know she has this machine and come to her with clothes to be made. Those who are able pay her in cash. Many are not and give her foodstuffs in exchange for her work. She is happy with either since their needs are basic. Food is as valuable and necessary as cash. The machine also enables her to make clothes for her own family which she would otherwise have to pay someone else to do. The benefits are great, however seemingly indirect.

As a tailor, this woman has fewer obstacles that constrain her work. People can come to her in her own home. She doesn't have to find a way to market her products in the bazaar. If her neighbors don't have sewing machines she can usually make an adequate business for herself. And, if she is especially competent in her skill, her business will flourish despite the competition around her.



Number Four

The next house we enter is the home of a fifteen year old girl. She is a widow and a mother. A small baby is cradled in her arms. The girl's eyes are hung with tears as she tells us her husband was killed in jihad (the holy war) when she was still pregnant. She is living with her husband's mother who is also a widow with four children who are all younger than the fifteen year old. They have two small rooms and a very small yard. There are a few chickens running about. As we all crowd into one of the rooms to talk, the cramped and desperate feeling is accentuated.

A few months before, ASAR gave her handicraft materials. She reaches up and pulls down a bundle perched on a shelf. As the knots are untied a pile of finished embroideries spill out. They are very simple in design but very beautiful. Her skill in coming years will be refined. She has worked hard but says she has sold only one or two pieces. Because there are no men in her

household she has no one to try and sell her things. Her neighbors all know embroidery themselves and are also poor. The pieces she sold were to some relatives who live too far away to be of any help. We keep talking, trying to think of options. We talk about designs and making items that are more functional such as prayer mats, pillowcovers, shirtfronts. Even so, how will these things get sold? Her skill isn't developed enough to be of much value. Her designs are traditional and appealing only to a specific population.

The greatest benefit this girl seems to reap from ASAR's assistance so far is that it keeps her mind occupied in giving her something to do and lets her practice her skill. She says as much, trying to emphasize the importance of that. Because she is thankful for even this, she tells us she will pray for the project.



Number Five

As we enter another yard we find a woman bent over a sewing machine. The machine is propped up on a few pillows and she is squatting on the ground next to it busily working. There is a dress of purple velvet cloth spread before her which she is decorating with gold laced edges sewn on in swirling designs. A neighbor has brought her this dress on which to work. This type of work is a particular tradition of her tribe. A woman may spend a year preparing the dress in which she is wed. In that time it is covered from hand to foot with special embroideries made by hand and by machine, with patches of beadwork and dangling silver pieces. The finished work suggests her value both by the quality of the work and the cost of the cloth and ornaments.

The busiest times of year for this tailor are marriage seasons and religious festivals, two periods when people want new clothing. At other times there is little to do. People are poor and cannot afford many clothes. Most of the women wear the one dress they have until it is worn out.

The woman received the sewing machine from ASAR a year before. Her own machine was left in Afghanistan when they fled their village during bombardments. She is a widow remarried to her husband's brother who is in his early teens. She is close to forty. Again the situation is not extraordinary among Afghans. He is not old enough to work and support her and her children but he is considered old enough to fight in jihad. He is there now, in Afghanistan, with other men from her village. Though fighting in family and tribal units is common practice, a real crisis occurs if they are captured or killed. All the male members of a family or tribe can suddenly be lost. She worries about her husband as she would about a son.

She too tells of the value of ASAR's assistance to her not only by providing a means to support her family, but by occupying her time, by moving her away from her grief for a short while.

Considerations for planning

Given the above scenarios, it becomes clear that the means of helping these women is opaque; difficult to ascertain. These observations leave us with a wealth of information to be processed, understood and reflected upon as an attempt is made to improve the state of their lives by identifing proper, culturally acceptable ways to help them through the problems they inform us of as we speak with them.

Subtle, practical changes can be instituted that are non-obtrusive but can certainly effect the standard and quality of the women's work, i.e., adaptation of tools to include a larger variety of skills, changes in color and quality of materials given to increase their marketability and retail value, training of staff on specialized equipment so that they can provide technical advice or even repair work during camp visits, and training of staff on monitoring methods to enable them to gather more useful information about the situations and difficulties of the women.

All these things have been instigated in the last six months since the starting of this study. What effects they cause will become visible in the following year as monitoring activities are carried out. Yet, it seems the major problems are still to be coped with: the fact of purdah, the lack of market, and under-developed skills.

Purdah, as a cultural reality, is perhaps a more difficult tradition for those of us who have lived in other ways than for these people who know of nothing else. Though it is surely inconvenient and an obstacle that blocks the way for many types of assistance, it is not a `problem' that needs to be `solved'. It is a tradition that must be respected and contended with.

The lack of market and under-developed skills are two problems which, at this time, must be considered in light of the prospect that the refugees may be returning to their homeland in the not so distant future. This must influence any decisions regarding new projects. Those that would demand considerable time and expertise to establish within camps are perhaps not currently the most effective or appropriate means of assistance. Those that supplement basic needs, are easily transferable, that rely on traditional skills and produce goods for local consumption seem more suitable.

These factors propose diffucult but critical considerations that must be examined as attempts are made to identify and implement assistance that is both appropriate and feasible.

Respectfully submitted

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AUSTRIAN RELIEF COMMITTEE
Assistance to Skilled Afghan Refugees

ASSISTING SKILLED WOMEN

Personal Observations and Considerations
regarding
Implementation of Income-Generating Projects
for
Female Afghan Refugees

Kathryn Kaldor
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May 1988

A study sponsored by the Norwegian Refugee Council

The following pages are an attempt to tell a story; to paint a picture of the life of Afghan women observed in refugee camps in Pakistan. For the last six months the Norwegian Refugee Council has supported a female income study to supplement the work of the Austrian Relief Committee's Assistance to Skilled Afghan Refugees project, a program which distributes tools to enable refugees to practice their skills and earn income to support their families. Since the aim of ASAR's program is only to identify and equip refugees with skills, it is up to the initiative of the refugee him/herself to find or create work to generate income.

For the women this often proves to be a very difficult task since in many respects it falls out of character with their background and culture. In the following pages, an effort is made to bring to light some of the difficulties faced by the women, by recounting episodes encountered with ASAR's female beneficiaries. These situations typify the general state of affairs endured by women and suggest problems that will be of importance for projects attempting to provide assistance to these women to consider.

Camp Life: The situation

It was raining again, for the second day in a row. As we walked through the camp we could watch the walls of the houses slipping away hour by hour. The simple earthen structures were falling back to the land they had been formed from months before. In this season there is a continual process of mending and rebuilding. Fortunately, the main materials are only a footstep away and the process is a familiar one to these people whose lives have always been shaped by the environments around them.

We are in a camp of refugees. We are midst a people who have been misplaced as their villages and lands have been destroyed and vacated in a war of ideologies most of them cannot define. We are midst a people who had in 1987* the second highest infant mortality rate in the world, a situation that illiteracy has the highest correlation with over any other factor worldwide. We are midst rural people whose isolated lives in the mountains and plains of Afghanistan were centered around and dedicated to their tribe and kin; to a life of tasks and rituals mirroring the lives of the generations before them; to a life of tending the herds, growing the crops, and marrying off the women. (* Population Reference Bureau, Inc., Washington, D.C.)

Knowing this, perhaps it is less surprising to meet a woman who cannot tell you the name of her village, or, to meet the occasional one who cannot tell you her own name other than by

reference to her father or her husband. Their secluded lives, not complicated with mazes of options and variations, have few reference points. Information such as the name of one´s village is not particularily important when one never leaves it for anywhere else. And for a women, whose status is incurred by the men in her family, a self name becomes insignificant.

It is raining. Within steps, as we approach the first house, our sandals are heavy with mud. The bare feet of the children guiding us are encased in mud, covering them like slippers. As we enter through the walls slowly disintegrating at our sides as the rain splatters against them, and walk towards a small room, a shelter from the drizzle, our shoes with each step peel away patches of earth from the yard. All seems to be falling apart. Senses of transiency, change and adaptation are reflected in the environment. This day´s weather images the people we are amongst; difficult and uncomfortable, everyone waits patiently for passage.

The room we´ve entered is the guestroom. Every Afghan house has one. A room set aside for visitors, specifically male ones who may not interact with, let alone see, the women of the household. As a room for guests and entertaining, it dons the finest wares of the household and reflects the status and wealth of the family. As we enter, we are ushered to sit on the floor, to lean against the pillows and cushions that have been spread for our comfort. The darkness is blinding. The window lets in sparse light and the doorway is a mass of dark shapes that have followed us. As the minutes pass they manage to squeeze in, crouching in huddles across the narrow low room, making space as more come. Soon over thirty women and children have arrived without a notice or an invitation. Outside the door the pile of shoes gets larger.

In the camps there are no telephones, no wide lanes with street names and house numbers. There are winding paths that weave a maze between the mud walls of the homes. The doorways are hung with draping pieces of worn cloth or are shuttered with a haphazard door of old lumber hinged together. Behind most, eyes seem to be looking. Voices in the lane carry over the walls and through the doorway. Voices of strangers draw people to rooftops and curtained doorways. Word spreads and soon the children come, or are sent. Strangers are like television: a novelty: a drama: entertainment: a show to be watched: a source of news and information.

After a house is entered the women come. There are factors that determine if they will arrive. For some the house may be too far away to freely go to. They have an ingrained sense of their boundaries. For others, the house may be of a tribe or family they are not friendly with. They would not be welcome there. These subtleties greatly effect how one can work in the camps.

The customs of the people must be known or one´s work can easily fail or be obstructed.

Purdah and camp leaders

Last year ASAR went to a camp, located less then an hour south of Peshawar, to distribute tools to skilled refugees who had been identified a month earlier. There were 38 women who were to receive equipment. The point of distribution was arranged near the camp administrator´s center, the executive office of the camp run by Pakistanis. The men´s distribution was also to take place near there. On the evening of arrival in the camp, the word was spread, via the mosques (a traditional means of making announcements) where the distribution would be and at what time the following day. The next day, though the men were coming in steady flows, no women arrived to pick up their tools. At the end of the day some of the camp´s Afghan leaders were asked where the women were. They said that the women knew about the distribution but were restricted from coming because it was improper for them to come out publicly in a place where so many men were also gathered. The next day the women´s distribution was moved to a new place and the women came.

The reasons for such a response are of course complicated by the situation of being refugees in a foreign land. These extremely tribal-orientated people have been resettled among strangers. Gradually the number of households without men has increased. Their history of carefully defined and executed customs and traditions is thrown out of kilter and into question. New situtions confront them and threaten their ingrained ways. And perhaps because they are inclined to think of this situation as temporary, they are less inclined to amend their ways.

So, meanwhile, it is the women, especially those left to fend for themselves in this novel situation, who suffer from the prohibition of the very responses they need to adapt to care for themselves. A woman without a man basically has no access to the outside world because a woman must live in purdah, i.e., seclusion, to preserve her honor, and more importantly, her family and tribe´s honor.

What is particularly striking in the given example is how strong the power of the camp leaders is. Women, mostly widows in states of extreme need, had been denied access to equipment valued up to a year´s worth of income; equipment that ideally would be a long term means of self-support. In speaking with the women, it is not they who hesitated from picking up the tools at the first distribution site. They were desperate to have access to a means of livelihood. The leaders prohibited them and uttered various threats of degradation to secure the women´s honor which was at

stake. What was curious was that preserving this, in this situation, seemed more vital to the men than to the women. Though the benefit of this equipment for the women was undebatable, the strict cultural mores were stronger.

Another tale of a situation encountered in a different camp further exemplifies the strength of these leaders and the institution on purdah.

During a monitoring phase of ASAR´s program in a camp four hours south of Peshawar, the women who had previously received tools were being questioned about their ability to find work. Several of them mentioned an embroidery project run by another agency that they had participated in. Lately, however, the religious leaders, the mullahs, were causing problems for them. The project gave out cloth, thread and designs for the women to take to their homes and complete. It was a simple process of picking up the materials and bringing them back when completed. The materials were available at a center connected to the basic health unit, which is one of the few places women can go to freely and tend to gather at, under the pretense of illness, for social reasons as much as for actual sickness.

Recently the mullahs had begun to make announcements that any woman caught with this project´s embroidery materials in her home would be fined 500 rupees, the equivalent of about five months income for most of the women. This later turned into a threat of burning down the homes of the women who didn´t obey. Three women found at the center picking up materials were locked into the room by a mullah. Announcements were made that it was better for the women to go to their graves than to leave their homes and work. These accounts were related to us by the women who were as much annoyed as intimidated by the mullahs. They had little respect for these leaders but were subject to their authority.

There was defiance in their voices. Some of the old women would sneak to the center and bring back materials for others. A young woman in the crowd pulled out from under her clothing a half finished shirtfront she was embroidering. There was a gleam of victory in her eyes, but quickly the piece was hidden again.

Communication

Such scenarios are countless. Obstructions arise that seem obscure. Problems arise in situations that seem completely innocent. A way that seems obvious is suddenly blocked. Especially when the concerns or efforts are directed towards women, the red lights start flashing. It is the culture, it is the way of the Afghans to protect their women. In this situation as refugees far from the familiar, suddenly in the midst of

strangers with strange ways, it becomes exaggerated.

Occasionally it is possible to breakdown the suspicions, but they must be broken down on Afghan terms. It takes time. It may take several hours and several cups of tea - an important social behavior - and it may take a `jirga´, a meeting of the men, who will debate and oppose each other and change their minds throughout hours of impassioned discussion. It may take days or weeks of mere presence or of considerate persuading for trust to be established, which becomes the key to open many doors.

In one situation a complete turn around of character came rather quickly. We arrived in two cars, only women, to investigate the situation of females in a newly established camp and ascertain whether our project would be appropriate for them. About 300 families had arrived a month before and were living in tents on a barren rock-strewn hillside. One of our Afghan staff began explaining to a crowd of men who were gathering why we had come. They immediately told her we would have to leave, we were not welcome and the women did not need our help. She stood there and kept talking. Debates ensued. More people gathered. Within fifteen minutes, men had been appointed as our guides and we were led towards the tents.

Once our intentions were made clear and believed, once they had been given the chance to express their suspicions and concerns, once the social formalities had been completed, we were allowed to begin our work. Without knowledge of the necessity of such communication and its essential strategic function one can easily misread the actions and desires of the people and can easily be misread. Of course, the style of the individual communicating makes a significant difference. The outcome of cooperation does not always happen, but until the appropriate social process is completed, one cannot be sure how firm the resistance initially faced is.

Beneficiaries

The practical problems in designing programs for and working with the women go beyond even the most deft artist of negotiation. The women live in `purdah´, i.e., seclusion. They are not expected to leave the boundaries imposed on them. The women are also not expected to be self-supporting. The men´s obligation is to enforce the former and to provide for the latter. Despite the fact that the social and familial organizations of their lives have been dramatically altered by becoming refugees, these age-old orders have been slow to be questioned or refined to adapt to the new problems and realities faced in their present existence. So far, the shifts regarding these expectations that have occurred have been to reinforce the bonds of purdah and have

disregarded the new difficulties of thousands of women left without men to care for them.

The women ASAR attempts to assist basically meet two criteria: they are poor relative to those around them and they are without a male family member to care for them economically. This generally means that they are widowed and have no sons old enough to work, or that the man available is unable to work.

The following case examples typify the situations of women assisted and the problems they face in supporting themselves:



Number One

The open courtyard is nearly empty apart from the few chickens scratching about and the three baby goats tied to stakes along the edge of a far wall. Along a nearer wall some thin cotton mattresses lay on the smooth hardened earth. Under a small fragile tree a few steps away, a rope bed stands angled haphazardly in the shade. On it an old man is stretched. An arm dangles over his eyes. The loose clothes lay over his thin limbs. A white turban crowns his head. A long white beard hangs from his chin. We step past him towards the mattresses. A few women scuttle around bringing pillows to tuck behind our backs. We have come to talk with the woman who is his wife. She is not old like him. She must be only in her thirties. Such a marriage

is not extraordinary in Afghan culture, but it leaves her in a difficult situation at this time in his life when he is too weak to work or attend to the daily obligations traditionally assigned to him.

She is a carpet weaver. Because she has little money she cannot afford to buy good wool which would make her carpets more valuable. Instead, she sends her young son to the bazaar to buy old sweaters which have been sent over in care parcels from western countries. She tears these apart for the yarn to make carpets and sells them cheaply. Her children are learning the craft as she did as a child. If we give her wool she can increase her income and take better care of her family.



Number Two

The woman tells us her husband is crazy. He was caught under the walls of the house that collapsed upon him when their village was bombed. Hours later he was dug out, freed, alive, but not the same. He hears things, he doesn't quite follow conversations, he's not sure where he is or who the people around him are. Sometimes he is lucid; he has those moments. And sometimes he is violent. He comes in when we are there. He sits quietly against the wall holding his head. He answers simple questions that need to be repeated. His general ambience is of a man out of touch, a spirit somewhere else.

This war has put this woman in an increasingly typical situation. Tradition issues the man with the obligation to support and defend his family. Tradition insists on a virtually cloistered existence for the woman. By tradition she cannot go to the marketplace, a center where strangers are, a place where she would be seen by other men. As one man told me, "If I take my wife to the bazaar she must not talk. No one is to hear her voice." In a culture of such extreme restrictions, a woman left without a man who can take care of her is in a sensitive predicament.

Another more important factor that suddenly concerns this woman is economic support. Though a primary valuation of a woman is judged by the skills she possesses and can bring into a household, these skills are generally not spent outside the household. Among some tribes of the northern regions that are famous for their carpet weaving skills and among the Kandahar people who specialize in fine, exquisite embroidery and among other qroups who possess such developed and lucrative skills, the sale of the women's handicrafts is acceptable. (However, even among these groups where the main economic stay is due to the skills of the woman, because of other restrictions, a woman without a man and thus without access to the world outside her household, will have difficulty getting her product to the market.)

Among the above-mentioned woman's tribe, however, it is not acceptable for the crafts she can produce to be sold outside the household. Her skill is beadworking. Adorning every woman's dress in the vicinity are colorful patches of geometric designs; patterns of beads sewn for ornamentation. Small rings, necklaces, mirrors stitched with beaded frames, small bags, earrings and simple decorative pieces are all produced. When asked if she had considered selling these items in the local bazaar to make money to support her family, she told us she had attempted that. Initially the men in her extended family agreed. After a short time, however, they quit bringing things to the bazaar. Local Pakistani men were buying the items. Afghans from other tribes were buying the items. To see crafts their women had made going out of the home into the possession of other men was unacceptable. Though this woman has no other way to support her family, it is still not acceptable.